

## Historical Land Uses

### County Boundaries and Livestock Populations in 1880 and 1900

#### **Learner Outcomes**

The learner will

- Assess the impact of historical actions on county boundaries and livestock distribution.
- Work individually and in teams to determine livestock stocking rates.

#### **Background**

In 1860 and 1861 the New Mexico Territorial legislature created three new counties: Arizona in the southwest, San Juan in the northwest, and Mora in the northeast. In the following year both Arizona and San Juan were eliminated. In 1869, Lincoln County was created from the eastern part of Socorro County.

Prior to 1880, American botanists and military personnel traveling in the New Mexico Territory describe vast grasslands. Upland mesas and canyons were brush-free and dominated by grama grasses (*Bouteloua spp.*), sacaton grasses (*Sporobolus spp.*) and bluestem grasses (*Andropogon spp.*). Early explorers frequently write about the inability to find firewood and problems encountered when Indians burned the grasslands. After the Civil War, Indians were placed on reservations, and livestock producers freely grazed the southern half of the New Mexico Territory. Within a few years, farmers followed the cattlemen, and irrigated farming activities began in the 1880s.

By 1880, Socorro and Dona Ana Counties were divided into Socorro, Dona Ana, Grant and Lincoln Counties. These counties represent the area covered by the Chihuahuan Desert. The Chihuahuan Desert is defined as an area where frost-free days annually exceed 190, and precipitation annually varies from 200 to 475mm.

Following the Civil War, railroad expansion provided rapid transportation and movement of agricultural and mining equipment and products. As human population increased so did the demand for meat, vegetables and fiber. Horses, cattle, sheep, goats and pigs were driven or shipped from the eastern United States and northern Mexico to graze the mesas and canyons. Fertile lowlands were plowed and rivers rechanneled to provide irrigation water for crops. Between 1880 and 1935, there were frequent droughts followed by floods. The combined effect of overgrazing, plowing, drought and flooding was accelerated soil erosion, and the region changed from semi-desert grassland to semi-desert shrubland.

H. C. Hooker, a long-time resident of the New Mexico and Arizona Territories, described the destructive events:

*In 1870 there were large beds of sacaton and grama grasses and the river ran shallow with banks covered with grass, shrubs and trees. In 1900 the riverbed dropped 20 feet and the vegetation had been removed by grazing, farming and flooding. Commenting on livestock numbers, Hooker stated: There were fully 50,000 head of cattle at the upper end of the valley in 1890. In 1900, there were not more than one-half that number, and they are doing poorly.*

C. J. Bayless, another long-term resident, stated:

*Beaver dams checked water flow in 1885, but trappers exterminated the population, and within 5 years the channel was from 3 to 20 feet deep.*

Bayless grazed 40,000 cattle in 1880, but by 1901 there was insufficient forage for 3,000. Many other observers noted similar changes throughout the New Mexico Territory and the State of New Mexico between 1900 and 1935.

### **Materials**

- Supplement numbers 2.13, 2.14
- Overhead projector
- Marking pen
- Calculator
- Ruler

Activity #1

### **New Mexico Territory Boundaries in 1880 and 1900**

2 class periods

### **Procedure**

The teacher will

- Use map supplements to discuss facts in the Background section.